Sunday, September 11, 1977

SERIOUSLY, BUT NOT LITERALLY! (NO. 1 IN A SERIES: THE BIBLE AND HUMAN SEXUALITY)

Romans 15:4-6; Hebrews 1:1-3

Recently I came across two different kinds of advertisements by churches. One ad indicated that the Bible was the foundation and center of that church and went something like this: "Bethel Church is a Bible-believing church stressing the systematic teaching of God's word. We believe the Bible is God's revelation of himself to the human race and its message is adequate for all the spiritual needs of man." The church's fall program was all Bible study groups.

The church sponsoring the ad has one kind view of Biblical interpretation which is based on the belief that the entire Bible is divinely inspired word for word and therefore contains no errors. Often such a view of the Bible means that all the stories in the Bible are to be taken litera11y; that one has to believe that Jonah was swallowed by the whale and that creation took place exactly as the story is told in the first two chapters of Genesis.

The other advertisement by a different kind of church went like this: "28 reasons you might like us (and one reason you might not). We have something for all. Exceptional preaching, exciting worship, weekday study groups on the Bible and on other contemporary problems, choirs, concerts, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Social Concerns Seminars, Yoga classes, poetry groups" and the list went on to list a total of 28 different program opportunities. It was a lot like our congregation in its variety. At the end of this ad was the one reason some might not be attracted to this particular church, the ad said, "We don't take the Bible literally, just seriously! Can you live with that?"

It was not accident that the church which sponsored this ad was a congregation of the United Church of Christ. But the main point is that these two different ads illustrate two different ways of seeing the Bible and its relationship to the church.

This morning we are going to look specifically at how a church like ours views the Bible. This is an introductory sermon to several more in a series and the sermon series is related to the Bible study group which begins a week from this coming Monday, September 19, and will deal with the issue of "The Bible and Human Sexuality." How then do Christians in our tradition understand the Bible and its use?

1. First of all, we try to put Jesus Christ, his birth, death and resurrection, at the center of our faith, instead of the Bible being at the center. As the book of Hebrews in the Bible puts it, "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." Or as the Gospel of John states, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

First and foremost, the church is a community of persons who acknowledge God as creator and sustainer and Jesus Christ as God's redeeming activity. This means we seek to be a community of persons who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and which is committed to following his example and teachings. A study of the Bible and what it has to say plays an important role in all of this. but the event of Jesus Christ is the center of the church and not the Bible.

2. Secondly therefore we always try to remember that the Church as a community of believers produced the Bible rather than the Bible producing the church. Let's look at this more closely.

In the case of the Old Testament of the Bible, a community of believers called Hebrews or Jews first comes into e1cistence and the Old Testament is the remembered record of that community and its interaction with God.

When this community first comes into view it is a Semitic clan, or group of clans wandering between the two great civilizations centered upon the Euphrates and the Nile. Next it appears as a nation, bearing the national name of Israel, settled in its own territory and governed by its native chieftains and kings.

The small kingdoms decline and fall, and the community ceases to exist as an independent state. With the Baby-lonian conquest it is absorbed into the all-embracing empire of the Middle East, which under various dynasties persisted through many centuries of the ancient world. •

But then this little community appears in a new form. A small group of returned exiles organizes itself as a partly autonomous community under the protection of the imperial government. The restored community is neither monarchy nor republic. Its rulers are priests. Its legal code is the Law of God. It has its center in the Temple at Jerusalem, but its authority and tradition run through hundreds of Jewish over the whole civilized colonies spread world. It is out of this community which produced the Old Testament that Jesus Christ comes.

As the Christian community comes into being, it is a first made up entirely of Jews who keep most of the Jewish religious rules. But gradually, this new community begins to transcend all national distinctions in his membership. Parts of the Old Testament are the scriptures for these followers of Jesus Christ. Only later does the New Testament begin to come into being. Again, it is the community called the church which produces it.

The writers of the New Testament are quite clear that Christianity is a new thing, indeed a new creation of God's doing; and yet it is the continuation of the Israel of God. It is often called the "New Israel." But when the old historic name "Israel" is applied to this continuous community, it means now not any racial or national group, but simply the people of God; that is to say, a community defined solely by its relation to the eternal Creator of the universe.

The Christian Church, then, conceives itself as the continuing embodiment of the historic "Israel of God; and we receive the Bible from the hands of the Church. If you ask why, this particular collection of just these sixty-six books form the collection which is the Bible, the only answer is that these have been handed down by the Church as its Scriptures. This means also however that to truly understand the Bible, we need to study alongside it the history of the church and its traditions.

For example, take the twenty-seven writings which make up the New Testament. Why are these twenty-seven included? They are not the whole of early Christian literature by any means. There is a selection out of a larger body of writings, some of which have come down to us, while others were lost, though some of these have been rediscovered by modern archaeologists. It is probably that the impulse to put together a collection of writings by the early church came about because after several hundred years, the continuity of the Church was threatened by extravagances and eccentricities: of Belief and practice within, as well as by persecution from without. In response to these dangers the Church set out to consolidate its own life and beliefs. These twenty-seven writings had gradually through usage and tradition

become the norm or standard of Christian faith and life, so it was natural that they became the New Testament.

3. In the third place, since the Bible is the remembered story, history and traditions of a community which covers more than a thousand years, not only is the Bible made up of all different kinds of writings, but it speaks with many voices during this history. One can see this in a growing conception of the nature of God. God as perceived by some of the Old Testament stories is understood quite differently by the New Testament because of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Taken as a whole, one finds in the Bible a multiplicity of viewpoints rather than a single perspective on hun1an life. But this is not surprising. Traditions live, move, and change as new conditions are confronted. This is true of all written tradition. The United States Constitution with its first ten amendments is today interpreted and used quite differently than it was one hundred-fifty years ago. It is still the same basic Constitution, but the conditions it confronts in the nation are different and so it is always being reinterpreted. This way it remains a living document.

That's the way the Bible deals with itself. It's the way the community of Israel dealt with the Old Testament. It's the way Jesus dealt with the Old Testament even more so. Often, he said to his listeners. "You have heard that it was said of old... but I say unto you!" In fact, Jesus'conflict with the religious authorities, which proved fatal in the end, arose principally over the question of his authority to reinterpret, contradict, and even disobey some of the laws of the Old Testament as they were then being interpreted. At one point, Jesus was so bold as to say, "I am the way, the truth and the life," implying that his listeners worshipped the book too much.

So, the Biblical tradition has to remain alive and constantly be reinterpreted. It is not fixed or static. To struggle with scripture, to study the scriptures, to not be afraid of hard questions, to bring the best critical and historical scholarship and discipline to its study, to try to separate the various kinds of writings — such efforts are to be celebrated, not deplored or feared. Such study and effort are crucial signs of the faithfulness and renewal of the church in every age. Only a dead church can be either apathetic or unanimous about the meaning and use of scripture.

Because we recognize the Bible as Holy Scripture does not carry with it any objection to free and candid criticism. The early church began biblical criticism in the 3rd century. During the early years, there was a considerable amount of critical discussion upon such questions as the authorship of various writings and their relative value. There was discussion about the contradictions in the Old Testament and the differences among the four Gospels.

From the beginning, it was also assumed that parts of the Old Testament were not to be followed by the Christian community because Jesus Christ and later the New Testament took precedence. It was assumed that the Old Testament as a whole needed interpreting in the light of the new teachings of Christianity.

We also know from studying the early church biblical scholars that the early church was aware that there are parts of the Bible where the real meaning intended by the author is not the plain literal sense of the words or story and where an unintelligent insistence upon the literal sense stands in the way of a true understanding.

The book of Jonah in the Old Testament is an example. The famous whale or rather sea monster is no zoological specimen. The ancient monster of chaos, the dragon of darkness was a familiar figure in several mythologies of the ancient world, and the story how a god or hero was swallowed by the monster but made his victorious escape, was widely known and carried a well-recognized symbolic meaning.

Thus, when the Gospel according to Matthew uses the story of Jonah as a symbol of resurrection from the dead (Matthew 12:40) it is not very far from the original intention of the myth. It seems probable that the author of the book of Jonah applied it to the resurrection of the Israelite nation after its submergence by the Babylonian conquest. In any case we are dealing here with symbolism and a recognition of this fact can save much embarrassment. The idea of taking such stories in a purely literal sense would've never occurred to the early church or to the early community of Israel which produced the story. They were concerned about the meaning of the story and not whether or not it actually happened.

It was only after the Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries and following that the Bible began to be construed in such a which demanded that equal and absolute authority be accorded to every part of the Old and New Testaments since it was all verbally inspired.

This led further to all sorts of weird and complete misuses of parts of the Bible like the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation, and these misuses continue and even become best-sellers — books like the "Late, Great Planet Earth" are an example.

So, as we study the Bible and try to apply its teachings and truths to today's problems and issues like many of the aspects of sexuality, we will be doing so by following these principles of interpretation.

1. We begin with the central event of Jesus Christ and interpret the whole Bible through that event.

2. The Old Testament therefore for Christians is always seen through the light of the New Testament.

3. And within the New Testament itself, we begin always with the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and particularly with the events and teachings of Jesus Christ. And all of this is to be seen through his summary teaching-- "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and Soul and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This means that we do not look to the Bible for specific answers to specific questions, but rather recognize that the primary data for working out ethical principles and values is God's love as revealed in the history of the community of Israel, in the event of Jesus Christ and in the history of the "new Israel, the Christian Church. These are the kinds of principles we will be following in the coming weeks in this sermon series as we look at some of the issues concerning the Bible and Human Sexuality. Amen.